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The Marketing of Tolerance

The Museum of Tolerance shows what we can learn and improve

By Kat Avila | Web Published 11.4.2002

I won't ask you to be more "open-minded,"
to be "fair,"
to "respect me for what I am,"
to be "tolerant."



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I don't want your open-mindedness.
I don't want your charity.
I don't need your permission [to exist].

-- from "Open-mindedness: A Warrior's Chant" by Kat Avila, in Cecilio Garcia-Camarillo et al.'s Cantos Al Sexto Sol: An Anthology of Aztlanahuac Writing (c) 2002

The Museum of Tolerance (MOT) is the educational branch of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a prominent Jewish human rights organization. It is located at 9786 West Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles. I had been wanting to visit the MOT ever since I had overheard a fellow teacher discussing it as a possible field trip with her college-age foreign students.

I suppose my father may even have visited the museum as he had had an indefatigable interest in Jewish culture and religion, so much that when I posthumously donated his large collection of Judaic books to a private Jewish school the librarian thought surely the man had been a scholar, instead of a former naval



gunner's mate whose last job was with the U.S. Postal Service.

Another reason I had for going was because of my frustration with the stubborn endurance of anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, and homophobia in the U.S., and it disturbs me greatly the casualness with which irrational hatred can be shared and rationalized.

As I turned into the MOT parking structure, my car was stopped by a security guard. I was asked to show identification and to open the trunk of my car so it could be searched. A sign of the times, I supposed, and a reminder of the fear many urban Americans live with daily. An adult ticket for the museum cost \$10.

After a short orientation and a stroll through the Tolerancenter, designed to raise awareness about personal biases, behaviors that support intolerance, and historical intolerance, I joined a group of eighth graders and their teacher as they were lead through the Holocaust Exhibit by a docent. The exhibit was a compressed simulation of what European Jews may have seen, heard, and experienced during those difficult times.

As I sat in a recreated gas chamber, I wondered what became of the girl whose face was on the plastic card that had been distributed at the start. At the end of the exhibit, there was a computer terminal where I inserted the card, obtained a printout of the girl's biography, and read what was her ultimate fate: "After an agonizing journey of several days, with little food or water, the prisoners arrived. Rashka and her family were immediately sent to the gas chambers where they were murdered. Rashka was fifteen years old." Rashka reminded me of fourteen-year-old Aiji Nagano, whose

story I learned in a similar fashion at Manzanar, the site of a World War II U.S. internment camp for Japanese Americans who were stripped of their civil rights and livelihoods because of their ethnicity.

The images of brutality and death I saw did not teach tolerance to me, I opined to one museum staff member. Basically I learned how to extinguish a race of people, and did not come away with a strong sense of why it should be preserved and appreciated. Shouldn't somehow visitors be educated about Jewish culture and religion as well? But the staff member's response was that there were other museums that did that better. MOT's online multimedia learning center (<http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/>) concentrates mainly on the Holocaust as well.

My other concern was I didn't feel there was a potent contextual tie-in with American intolerance, often framed as black vs. white, which existed at the time of the Holocaust. Within California, there was segregation (recall Mendez v. Westminster [1947] to end the segregation of Mexican American children in the schools) and the internment of Japanese Americans (visit the Japanese American National Museum at 369 East First Street, Los Angeles).

For comparative purposes, there should be prominently displayed pictures of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki next to those of the Holocaust, advertised in an MOT brochure as "the ultimate example of man's inhumanity to man." The U.S. did not drop the atomic bombs on military targets but chose urban centers filled with children, and those bombs continued killing and poisoning long after war had ceased.

After visiting the MOT, the next day I went to visit the Museum of La Historia Society de El Monte at 3240 Tyler Avenue in El Monte, California, to learn about the history of Mexican Americans in that city, to see the face of a barrio community that continued to thrive despite bigotry and racism. I asked about La Historia's future plans, which includes educational programs that will enhance the message of tolerance marketed by the MOT.

The MOT is a good starting place to learn about tolerance, but it should not be the place where one stops.

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